

*Putting Cargoes Through: The U.S. Navy at Gibraltar During the First World War* by Albert P. Niblack edited by John B. Hattendorf

Calpe Press, Gibraltar, 2018 (Paperback)

119 pages,

ISBN: 978-1-919665-10-8

Vice Admiral Albert P. Niblack commanded the U.S. naval base at Gibraltar and US naval forces in the western Mediterranean during the final year of World War One, for which he received the Distinguished Service Medal. At some point afterwards he wrote an account of the U.S. Navy's role at Gibraltar which was submitted for publication to the U.S. Naval Institute journal *Proceedings*. The typescript ran to 57 double-spaced pages and being too long for a journal article, was never used. It ultimately found its way into the U.S. National Archives where it languished unnoticed for several decades. It is now published in this booklet with additional biographical and historical material edited by John Hattendorf. This includes an interesting short essay by Niblack on his appreciation of the role of the U.S. Navy World War One.

The naval base at Gibraltar in 1917 is described by Niblack as having become the largest cargo convoy port in the world. This was because it was the hub from which supplies for Southern France, Italy, North Africa, Salonika and the Near East were assembled and dispatched. The supplies themselves came in predominately from Great Britain and its empire, the U.S. and South America. Niblack describes how the small breakwater-protected harbour at Gibraltar could only accommodate a limited number of warships, hospital ships and troopships and was always overcrowded, with berthing spilling out into the waters of neutral Spain.

The vast majority of ships passing through the port were in fact berthed in Gibraltar Bay, which Niblack notes: "It was only by courtesy that the adjacent waters of Spain were tacitly regarded as Gibraltar harbour". That German spies could easily monitor the movement of ships was always a concern, no less so because around 3,000 dockyard workers commuted from Spain to work in the harbour every day. There was also the additional potential for a U-boat attack on the bay itself, which never happened.

It is interesting to note that there was in fact only one escorted convoy sent from the U.S. to Gibraltar, which sailed in January 1918. All other shipping sent on that route during the war sailed independently. The convoys covered the Mediterranean and the run to the east and west coasts of Great Britain. Escorts at Gibraltar would escort outward bound vessels to the U.S. out to 10 degrees west, after which they sailed alone. There was always a shortage of escort ships which lead to the taking up of coastguard cutters and yachts. Niblack points out that even by March 1918 the number of escorts was only two-thirds of what was needed, leading to a quarter of ships still sailing in and out of the Mediterranean unescorted.

Gibraltar was also an important coaling station. Niblack describes how in order to maximise cargo space, the majority of ships sailing from the U.S. only carried enough coal to reach their destinations. The British provided the coal to keep the ships moving which maximised cargo capacity. Tables show that in January to April 1918 ships proceeding to the U.S. took on 125,121 tons of coal at Gibraltar, furnished by Britain.

A short chapter also describes the development of the Naval Overseas Transport Service (N.O.T.S.) which began life in January 1918. The ships which it operated were entirely crewed by naval personnel and its numbers expanded to over 35,000 men in 347 ships by the Armistice. The N.O.T.S. represented a third iteration in the employment of U.S. flagged merchant ships in the war alongside those under charter and those with armed guards on board. Niblack makes the point that this made it difficult to give an accurate figure for the number of U.S. merchant ships sunk during the conflict. He calculates that the total was 159, including 13 N.O.T.S. ships. This compared to 3,147 British ships lost.

Clearly smooth cooperation with the Britain and the other Allies was vital to the running of the convoys. Niblack praises the Royal Navy's senior officer at Gibraltar, Rear Admiral Heathcoate S. Grant for the smooth incorporation of the newly arrived U.S. ships into the convoy arrangements. He notes that Grant had been Naval Attaché in Washington just prior to the war and that "his previous association with our people made our association simple and sympathetic". There was a job to do and as he concluded: "our association with the allied forces was a sacred bond. We went across to keep faith and we kept it".

INNES McCARTNEY